

**The Comparative Importance of Third Elections
in Developing New Democracies**

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An Era of Democracy

Few recent changes around the world have been more significant than the global spread of democratic governance. We recall that in 1974, just 39 countries the world over were ruled by constitutional governments that held regular, competitive elections. Today, nearly 120 governments are electoral democracies. This large group accounts for 60 percent of the world's independent nations, containing more than two-thirds of the world's people. Among the 48 countries in Africa south of the Sahara, as late as 1990, 44 were ruled by military governments or single-party regimes; today, there are at least 20 electoral democracies in the region, along with many others that have made significant gains in political freedom and pluralism.

The global spread of democratic government has created a tremendous sense of possibility in countries that were long dominated by autocrats and by closed, corrupt regimes. Democratic reforms have opened political space in which citizens can more easily speak their minds, express their concerns, organize for common interests, seek out information, join political associations and parties, and choose their leaders. The new freedoms and institutions that accompany democracy provide important opportunities for holding leaders to account and promoting the transparency of government. These changes have taken root in dozens countries and regions with different historical legacies and cultures. They have transformed political life in societies that just a short time ago seemed to be in the grip of dictators and single party states.

Challenges of Democratic Development

While democratization has been an encouraging trend in many regions, we know it is not inevitable. Countries that undertake political reform have no assurances that democratization will be long-lasting, or that a change of regime will produce desired improvements in the quality of governance. Democratization is a risky process, and democratic development is uncertain.

We can cite many recent examples – including Ukraine, nearby Cote d'Ivoire, the Republic of Georgia, Madagascar, Russia, or Venezuela – to remind us that the road to democracy is often fraught with difficulty. Governments may fall under the sway of narrow elites or ambitious leaders who seek to extend their power. Corruption may sap the vitality of public institutions and undermine economic progress. Deep social divisions, including ethnicity and religion, can quickly erode social peace and political stability. The paths to democratic distress and failure are as numerous as the roads to consolidation.

Many new democracies face immediate challenges of survival, as governments struggle to maintain constitutional rule and electoral processes that are threatened by conflict, military coups, or aspiring dictators waiting in the wings. Over the longer term, we recognize important questions of how to improve the quality and depth of democracy. All democracies confront important tasks of broadening personal freedoms; encouraging genuine political competition; promoting the accountability of leaders; resolving conflict; advancing a general rule of law; and building efficient and effective public institutions.

Elections are a crucial factor in meeting these challenges. By creating regular channels for political competition, with opportunities for citizens to evaluate and change leaders, elections represent a cornerstone of democratic rule. Indeed, open, fair and competitive elections have become a litmus test for distinguishing democracies from other types of governments, many of which would like to claim the label of democracy without honoring its requirements. But “hypocrisy is the homage that vice pays to virtue”, and without transparent elections it is impossible to speak of an effective democracy.

Certainly, there are other features of political change that are essential for a healthy, functioning democratic system. General civil liberties, effective and accountable governance, widespread political rights, and checks on the power of government are all recognized as elements of a developing democracy. Many observers, including the Nobel laureate Jimmy Carter, have agreed that ‘democracy is more than just elections, but it certainly can be no less than elections.’ It is therefore appropriate to focus on the decisive role that elections can play in developing democracy, and the reforms that can help Nigeria to realize the democratic aspirations of its people.

In the wake of Africa’s wave of democratic reforms, much attention was focused on the second elections after the initial transition from authoritarian rule. Second elections were important because they were presumably free from the restrictions or intervention of previous authoritarian rulers. Held in a more open and competitive

climate, they promised a true test of the new spirit and practice of democracy. Second elections appeared to be a bellwether for democratic consolidation.

Time and experience, however, have shown us that second elections were less important than we might have supposed. The really crucial elections in new democracies – not only Africa, but around the world – are the elections that mark the transfer from one democratic administration to another. These are often the *third* elections since the transition to democracy, since most countries have adopted two-term limits on the executive. In view of Nigeria's upcoming third elections, it is important for us to consider the role of elections in comparative perspective, and the special importance of third elections in the development of democratic governance.

The Electoral Advantage

Elections have become such a routine event, and so common around the globe, that it is easy to lose sight of their importance for democratic development. Elections furnish many advantages for democratic governance. First, the regular cycle of campaigns, voting, and the turnover of government, can be a powerful affirmation of the “rule of the people,” often regarded as the foundation of democracy. When Nigerians have been asked in opinion polls to define democracy in their own words, more than half answered, ‘government by the people,’ or ‘political rights and elections.’ Nigerians largely agree with Americans and citizens of other democracies that the people's voice is essential to democracy, and that elections are an important way to exercise that voice.

Competitive elections also provide citizens with political choice. The ability of voters to weigh parties, ideas, and candidates, and to select among them, is an integral part of the democratic process. A well-functioning electoral system offers citizens political alternatives, and permits them to make decisions that express their preferences. Competition and political choice require open access to information, another benefit that accompanies the electoral process. The free exchange of ideas and information through political campaigns, the media, and groups within civil society, offer voters numerous perspectives on public affairs. A vibrant flow of information increases political knowledge, sharpens public debate, and pushes candidates to account for their ideas and their personal record. An informed citizenry can make genuine political choices, and the availability of alternative sources of information gives life to political competition.

Elections provide essential validation for democracy by increasing the confidence of individual citizens in their ability to meaningfully participate in public life. When people feel that their personal interest in politics, and their engagement in elections, makes a difference, they are much more likely to value the democratic system. Elections remind average citizens that they have a stake in politics, and their continued interest and participation is a vital part of national life. When citizens share feelings of personal political efficacy, this encourages a general sense of legitimacy for democratic rule. The public's view that their system of government meets their needs and aspirations is a basic ingredient of stable and effective governance. Elections are important rituals of democracy that can regularly confirm and reinforce the legitimacy of the system.

Even the losers in a contentious election may come away with regard for democracy if they feel the contest was honestly fought and judged. The process can be as important as the outcome. For instance, the highly contentious 2000 election in the United States shook the confidence of many Americans, who questioned whether their votes were fairly counted. During the 2004 election, emotions were high on both sides. But the public's confidence in the electoral system was ultimately reinforced through efforts to promote transparency in the administration of the polling and by the clear outcome. Recent elections in Italy and Mexico also returned very close results, which were angrily contested by the losers. However, contentious elections did not provoke political crises in these countries because of the general credibility of electoral institutions and the legitimate outlets for contesting the results. In one recent study of elections throughout Africa, political scientist Staffan Lindberg found that (in third elections) losers accepted the results in three-fourths of the elections generally regarded as "free and fair" by observers. By contrast, losers always rejected the results of "flawed" elections.

By allowing for a change of leaders and fostering broad acceptance of the political process, elections can compensate for disappointments in government performance. New democracies face many policy problems, including economic development, reducing poverty, controlling corruption, and managing conflict, that do not allow for rapid progress. Inevitably, the citizens of any country are frustrated by the slow progress of generating jobs, reducing corruption, improving public services, or guaranteeing personal security. However, citizens can be patient with these day to day

problems when they have confidence in the legitimacy of their political system. Further, there is much evidence from around the world to show that citizens in democracies are sophisticated in distinguishing between the performance of government and the system of democracy. If there are regular opportunities to criticize or replace leaders, then the public is less likely to blame their economic or social problems on the democratic system, and therefore less likely to have sympathy for non-democratic alternatives such as military or single-party rule.

Liabilities of Flawed Elections

When elections are significantly flawed, most of these benefits turn into deficits or even threats to the survival of democracy. When the public faces repeated episodes of election rigging, political violence, and disorderly administration, their fundamental trust in the institutions and processes of electoral rule may rapidly dissipate. The most obvious liability of troubled elections is that political choices are foreclosed. As a consequence, many voters come to believe that their political will is being unjustly denied. The taint of misconduct in a controversial election can reduce confidence in the process and cast a shadow on the legitimacy of the ruling party or the winning candidate. Without genuine political competition, in which there is a realistic chance that power can change hands according to the will of the voters, the simplest premise of democracy is denied.

If elections are not fair and transparent, citizens lose personal confidence in their political influence. The sense of political efficacy among the citizenry of which we have spoken can quickly turn to frustration. Citizens are unlikely to invest their hopes and

aspirations in the political process if they believe that outcomes are pre-ordained, and their voice does not matter. When the public becomes disillusioned by a flawed electoral process, they are likely to withdraw into apathy or cynicism, sometimes becoming aggravated and militant. These attitudes are unhealthy for the development of a democratic political culture, and can easily create opportunities for non-democratic elements to exercise influence.

Along with the general disaffection among the public, we should take special note of the grievances among minority communities. In every plural society, there are some groups who believe they are marginalized by the political establishment, neglected by government, and excluded from meaningful participation. When democratic governance offers regular channels for expression and choice, minorities are still inclined to accept the political system as the best option for advancing their interests, even if they are not able to attain their full aspirations. In circumstances where electoral choice is compromised, however, their sense of exclusion increases, and aggrieved minorities may become more confrontational in their approaches to politics. Some groups may even turn their back on the political system or seek to part ways with the national community. In the most extreme situations, election flaws can ultimately challenge the integrity of the nation.

In fact there are many groups, and not just cultural minorities, who may be frustrated by a closed political process. Economic interest groups, religious communities, supporters of political parties, or members of particular communities may come to

believe that their opportunities are thwarted by a political system that is not truly inclusive. In these circumstances, groups with differing interests may be less willing to take the path of negotiation, conciliation, and compromise afforded by a democratic process. Instead, the political climate is poisoned by growing antagonism and polarization among groups, which sometimes bursts into open conflict.

A flawed process of elections also tends to shed light on the shortcomings of government performance. As I have noted, democratic citizens around the world often separate the person from the system: they can make keen distinctions between the performance of leaders, and the possibilities of a democratic regime. When large segments of the public believe that they cannot hold leaders to account, or vote new personalities into government, they are likely to become increasingly discouraged by a poor economy, persistent corruption, crime, insecurity, or ineffective governance. Instead of seeing the possibilities for improving national problems with various leaders over the long term, citizens may come to view these problems as insurmountable. The democratic regime may lose basic legitimacy. The public may become indifferent to anti-democratic challenges, or they may come to accept non-democratic political alternatives.

These effects may be seen in any elections, but they are accentuated, I would argue, in critical elections when incumbents are expected to step down. Especially in countries that have experienced a long period of authoritarian rule, the symbolic appeal of new leadership and a change of administration hold great potency, demonstrating the possibilities of political choice and public influence for change. When democratic

aspirations are thwarted in these hopeful moments, disillusionment among elites and the mass public can easily give rise to protest, violence, and potential crisis. Managing these key elections is a crucial challenge for fledgling democracies.

Reflections from Recent Comparative Experience

Let us turn from these general points to consider some recent examples. Many of us recall the recent election drama in Ukraine. After two terms in office the strongman president, Leonid Kuchma, bowed to term limits and prepared to step down. However, the November 2004 elections were apparently rigged in favor of the ruling party's candidate, and supporters of opposition candidate Yushenko vigorously protested the results. For weeks, opposition protestors filled the streets of the capital while supporters of the ruling party threatened secession or civil war if their candidate, Mr. Yanukovich, was not seated. Ultimately, the Supreme Court voided the election and new polls were held, giving Yushenko, the opposition flag-bearer, a lopsided victory. Flawed elections threatened the stability and political equilibrium of the nation, but the successful effort to stage a fair election helped to resort confidence in the system, and was hailed as a positive turning point for this new democracy.

Similar events occurred in the Republic of Georgia a year earlier, when fraudulent elections for parliament led to mass demonstrations against Eduard Shevardnadze, another powerful executive whose previous elections were significantly flawed. The protests compelled the president to resign, and the Supreme Court order new national polls. The opposition candidate Mikhail Saakashvili won a landslide. Here too, the

country emerged from an election crisis to a more hopeful future of political reform, with renewed popular legitimacy for the democratic regime.

These scenes have been played out in Africa as well. We can vividly recall the standoff in Madagascar after the December 2001 elections, when government officials awarded an electoral victory to President Ratsiraka, while the supporters of opposition candidate Ravalomanana took to the streets in protest, alleging election fraud. For months, the opposition claimed the streets of the capital city, while supporters of the president blockaded the major ports and roads of the country. Eventually, negotiations and popular action compelled Ratsiraka to concede, and the country regained political peace.

If the outcome in Madagascar was generally welcome, surely the course of events in nearby Cote d'Ivoire is a major cause for concern. In the controversial 2000 election, the incumbent Laurent Gbagbo sought to disqualify the major challenger, Alasanne Ouatarra, through changes in citizenship laws. Violent gangs mobilized on both sides of the political divide. Although Gbagbo held power, the country was plunged into civil war in 2002 when segments of the army rebelled. One of West Africa's most stable and prosperous countries has descended into conflict and collapse, instigated in large part by polarization over a flawed election.

We may also take note of the worsening crisis in Zimbabwe, where the incumbent president and ruling party have clung to power through elections considered illegitimate

by large segments of the electorate. The resulting political tensions, accompanied by economic and social collapse, have erased prospects of development for at least a generation.

Many political crises emerge from troubled election outcomes, but there are also cases of successful reform. Mexico, for instance, had a closed and corrupt electoral system for decades. Although regular multi-party elections were held, the ruling PRI party was assured of victory because of its control of the electoral process and government resources. This began to change in the 1990s. Chronic economic problems and rising social unrest reduced confidence in the status quo. The public was jolted by the 1994 assassination of the PRI's presidential candidate. Senior leaders began to recognize the need for electoral reform. Mexico introduced a fully independent election commission and provided for increasingly fair and transparent elections for municipal, state, and legislative offices. In 2000, a candidate from an opposition party, Vicente Fox, won the presidency for the first time in several decades. Fox's presidency did resolve Mexico's national challenges, but his election was generally seen as a major transition in Mexican politics. In the recently-concluded July elections, candidate Andres Lopez Obrador has challenged the slim margin apparently won by Felipe Calderon. Yet Lopez Obrador and his supporters, despite deep anger about the results, have not rejected the political process, and have pursued their grievances through peaceful and legal channels.

In West Africa, we can also point to very heartening developments in Senegal and Ghana, where long-serving presidents honored term limits and created the conditions for

fully competitive elections. These incumbent leaders handed office to winners from the political opposition, and set their countries on an encouraging democratic path. The citizens of Senegal and Ghana express high levels of confidence in the legitimacy of their political systems, and the trend of democratic development has been widely recognized by the international community. Both countries, for instance, have moved toward the final stages of HIPC debt cancellation, and both are eligible for assistance under the US Millennium Challenge Account.

Concluding Lessons

What lessons can we take from these experiences and reflections? Let me conclude with a few brief points:

- **Elections are central, not incidental, to the course of democratic development.** The example of regular, fair, and transparent elections is an essential component in building democratic habits and institutions.
- **Flawed elections create major obstacles to democratization.** Flawed elections are not merely an annoyance to be periodically tolerated and then overlooked. Improper election procedures can cumulatively weaken, and even ruin, the prospects for democratization.
- **Inadequate electoral systems can be improved through serious efforts at reform.** Improving election administration, strengthening independent election agencies, promoting cooperation and empowering civil society, are important elements of electoral reform. Dysfunctional systems can become workable

systems. The elements of successful reform are generally agreed, but political commitment is essential.

- **Political leaders and elites have a crucial role in electoral reform.** One major source of electoral misconduct is the mutual mistrust among politicians and parties. When everyone expects the other side to commit fraud, then they are likely to engage in “pre-emptive” misconduct. A key to reducing misconduct is to engage political elites in negotiation and dialogue over basic standards of conduct, the best practices for political competition, and the adherence to common standards. By publicizing agreement over principles, and maintaining clear dialogue, it can be possible to reduce mistrust and to encourage all players to respect the “rules of the game.”
- **Civil society has a crucial role to play in electoral reform.** Civic organizations can fulfill many important roles, including election monitoring, legal reform, civic education, conflict resolution, and dialogue with politicians and parties over standards of conduct. Citizens’ organizations have an important place as watchdogs, monitors, advisors, and collaborators in promoting electoral reform.
- **The international community must sustain attention to electoral reform.** It is important to sustain the commitment of resources and personal energies to the goals of election reform in new democracies, and to be as forward-looking as possible in supplying assistance early in the election cycle.

Elections are a critical component in democracy. Elections can always be better. We need to focus on the problem early, consistently, and seriously. We hope the process of reform can guide Nigeria to a stronger democratic future.